

# Opioid pain medications: What you need to know

Learn how to safely use opioid medications

## What are opioids?

Opioids are prescription-only narcotic pain medications. They treat and manage moderate to severe pain by blocking pain signals in the brain. The most common opioid medications include:

- hydrocodone – common brands include Vicodin®, Lorcet® and Lortab®
- oxycodone – common brands include Percocet®, OxyContin®, Roxicodone® and Xtampza ER®
- morphine – common brands include MS Contin®, Kadian® and Avinza®
- fentanyl – common brands include Duragesic® and Fentora®

## Is it safe to take opioid medications?

Opioid medications are generally safe and useful for managing acute pain when prescribed and used appropriately for short periods of time. They also offer value for longer use in select patients, such as those with cancer. However, extended use can lead to dependence and/or addiction, and not taking them as prescribed can result in serious side effects including overdose and death.

## How do I safely take opioid medications?

- Do not take your medication more frequently than prescribed, and never take extra doses without consulting your doctor or pharmacist.
- To avoid dangerous interactions, talk with your doctor or pharmacist about all medications you take. Never mix alcohol or other sedating drugs, such as sleeping pills (zolpidem, Ambien®) or anxiety medications (diazepam, Valium®, alprazolam, Xanax®, lorazepam, Ativan®).
- Opioids are designed to be taken as needed. Once pain is under control, it is acceptable to take them less frequently or change to alternative options.
- Never share your medications with others.



### Why is the safe use of these medications important?

Prescription opioid abuse is a serious public health issue. Forty-six Americans die from a prescription opioid overdose every day.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the potential risks and how to take, store and dispose of these powerful medications properly can help avoid serious risks.

## What alternative pain medication options should I consider?

Pain relief options come in many forms – many with fewer risks and side effects than opioids. These include:

- Over-the-counter medications, such as ibuprofen (Motrin®), acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or naproxen (Aleve®)
- Prescription strength anti-inflammatory drugs such as celecoxib (Celebrex®), diclofenac (Voltaren®) and etodolac (Lodine®)
- Select prescription non-opioid medicines which target the nerves that produce pain, such as gabapentin (Neurontin®) and pregabalin (Lyrica®)
- Injectable and topical non-opioid therapies
- Chiropractic services, physical and massage therapy, exercise and cognitive behavioral therapy

## What risks are associated with taking opioids?

- Tolerance – needing higher and higher doses to achieve the same effect
- Dependence – having symptoms of withdrawal when the medication is stopped
- Addiction – uncontrollable cravings and an inability to control drug use
- Overdose or even death

## How should opioid medications be stored?

Opioids can be harmful or even fatal if used by someone other than intended. Even small amounts can be dangerous to children, pets and others. Store these medications in their original labeled packaging, and choose a place that cannot easily be accessed by others, such as a locked cabinet or drawer.

## How should I safely dispose of opioid medications?

According to a recent analysis, almost 60 percent of Americans have opioid painkillers stored at home that they no longer use.<sup>2</sup> This is a dangerous practice. Unused medications should be disposed of as soon as possible:

- Flush unused opioid medication down the toilet – the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers this an acceptable way to dispose of these medications.
- Find a nearby pharmacy with a medication take-back service. You can locate them on the DEA website at [deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug\\_disposal/takeback/index.html](https://deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/index.html).
- Ask your city, county or police department if they have a prescription drug take-back or disposal program.
- Mix the unused supply with an undesirable substance, such as cat litter or coffee grounds, and place the sealed container in your trash.
- For more information, please refer to [Where and How to Dispose of Unused Medicines | FDA](#)

1. National Institute on Drug Abuse, Drug Overdose Death Rates (February 2023) <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

2. Dyson MP, Dong K, Sevcik W, Graham SZ, Saba S, Hartling L, Ali S. Quantifying unused opioids following emergency and ambulatory care: A systematic review and meta-analysis. J Am Coll Emerg Physicians Open. 2022 Sep 30;3(5):e12822. doi:10.1002/emp2.12822. PMID: 36203538; PMCID: PMC9523453.



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